



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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BALD EAGLE CHICKS FROM THE WASHINGTON AREA HEAD FOR TENNESSEE

Today was moving day for three bald eagle chicks that carry with them this year's hopes for increasing the bald eagle population of Tennessee, where eagles last nested successfully in the wild in 1961. The eaglets' transfer from captivity to the wild is being sponsored by industry, private conservation groups, and State and Federal agencies.

"This is the first time that any endangered species recovery effort has received such an all-encompassing degree of support from major corporations," said Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt, who toured the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to see the eagles depart and to commend the corporations.

"After the sickening experience last week of witnessing so many dead eagles," Watt said, "my spirit is refreshed to know that we are returning some of these majestic birds to the wild. I commend the scientists who produced these eaglets in captivity and the volunteers who will safeguard their release. And I salute the corporations and private groups for their support of this vital aspect of the bald eagle recovery program."

Last week, 50 people in 8 States were charged with multiple violations after a 2-year investigation by the Fish and Wildlife Service disclosed that almost 300 bald eagles had been deliberately killed to supply the black market trade in Native American artifacts.

The eaglets departing today were produced by the world's largest colony of breeding bald eagles in captivity at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, where a major grant from the Du Pont Company has helped expand the bald eagle captive breeding program. The conservation grant from Du Pont is the first direct contribution of its kind.

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The Patuxent facility has been a major source of eagles for restocking wild populations since 1977. In all, 52 eaglets have been returned to the wild from the renowned wildlife research center, located midway between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland.

At 2 months of age, the dark-brown feathered birds heading for Tennessee already stand about 2 feet high and have wingspans of about 5 feet. They are being flown to Nashville by American Airlines, the second year the airline has provided this public service. The company logo features the eagle.

The eaglets' gradual release to the wild over a 4-to-5-week period is being funded by Eagle Rare Bourbon, another major corporate supporter of the bald eagle recovery program. Eagle Rare Bourbon has expended considerable effort in a national bald eagle awareness and conservation program. It also has helped support the pioneering bald eagle "hacking" program in New York State where the Nation's first mated pair of released eaglets has produced five young since 1980, including two this year.

The bald eagle chicks are destined for the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) "Land Between the Lakes" on the Tennessee/Kentucky Border. They will be "hacked" to the wild by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and the Tennessee Conservation League, a private organization with 14,000 members. Last year, the release was financed by individual donations raised by the league, which assumed responsibility for it when reduced funding threatened to end the effort begun in 1980 by TVA and the State.

"Hacking" is the technique in which eagles--or other birds--learn to fly and forage for their own food without the guidance of adult birds. Two-month-old eaglets, either hatched in captivity or taken from nests where the population is stable, are kept in an artificial nest or platform for about 4 to 5 weeks. They are cared for by humans who stay out of sight so the birds retain their wild characteristics. Once the birds begin to fly--or "fledge"--their daily food provision is gradually reduced until they learn to find their own food, primarily fish.

Tennessee's bald eagle population was among those eliminated when the Nation's symbol suffered a drastic decline nationally. Once so populous they were considered a nuisance in some places, today there are only about 5,000 of the great birds year-round in the contiguous 48 States.

With the banning of DDT in 1972, wiser land management practices, and conservation programs such as captive breeding, the bird has begun to make a gradual comeback. But it is not yet out of danger. Many bald eagles are still unable to reproduce, and they are subject to many causes of mortality, such as collisions, electrocution from powerlines, poisonings from various contaminants, and illegal killing by vandals and for black market commerce in eagle feathers, beaks, talons, and bones.

"Thanks to the dedicated efforts of hundreds of volunteers across the country, private corporations, and State and Federal agencies, we are making slow but steady progress in returning bald eagles to the skies of America," Watt said. "But we will never make real headway as long as wildlife profiteers continue to slaughter these magnificent creatures by the hundreds every year. This has got to stop. I call on all Americans to help protect bald eagles and turn in their wanton killers."